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Physical Oppression Faced by Women in Sterian Shangpliang's Novel *Ka Kermion*: A Critical Analysis

Pynkmenhunlang G Sohtun ^{1*}, Dr. Bandarilin Bairo ²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Khasi, North- Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Khasi, North- Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Corresponding Author: * Pynkmenhunlang G Sohtun

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of physical oppression faced by women in Sterian Shangpliang's novel *Ka Kermion* from a feminist perspective. The study focuses on the experiences of Kermion, whose life is marked by male domination, physical violence, threats, sexual coercion, and the denial of bodily autonomy. The analysis draws upon the feminist perspectives of Kate Millett, Catharine A. MacKinnon, Sylvia Walby, bell hooks, and Susan Brownmiller to examine the ways in which patriarchal power operates through familial authority, physical violence, intimidation, and control over women's bodies and choices. The analysis reveals that Kermion's oppression begins within her own family when her uncle disregards her wishes and decides her future according to his own interests. Her resistance is further suppressed through physical violence and threats. Later, Werth subjects her to sexual coercion through the threat of a knife and physically assaults her when she challenges his actions. The violence ultimately results in the loss of her unborn child, highlighting the devastating physical and emotional consequences of violence against women. Through Kermion's experiences, the novel exposes the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and male domination within a matrilineal society. The study argues that the existence of matriliney does not necessarily eliminate patriarchal practices or protect women from oppression. Instead, *Ka Kermion* presents physical oppression as a means through which male authority is maintained and women's agency, freedom, dignity, and bodily autonomy are denied.

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INTRODUCTION

Physical Oppression Faced by Women in Sterian Shangpliang's *Ka Kermon*: A Critical Analysis

Physical oppression is one of the most direct ways through which power and domination can be exercised over women. It may include physical assault, beating, threats, intimidation, and other forms of force used to control women's bodies, choices, and freedom. In a patriarchal social structure, physical oppression can become a means of maintaining women's subordinate position by creating fear and limiting their ability to resist or exercise their own agency. Therefore, before analysing the physical oppression faced by women in Sterian Shangpliang's novel *Ka Kermon*, it is important to first understand the concept of physical oppression from different feminist perspectives.

Kate Millett, in her book *Sexual Politics*, examines the relationship between power and gender, stating: "Patriarchal societies establish relationships in which men exercise power over women, both within the family and in wider social institutions" (65). From this perspective, physical oppression can be understood as one of the ways through which male power is exercised over women, particularly when women's freedom and choices are restricted by male authority.

Similarly, Catharine A. MacKinnon, perspective is expressed in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. "Her feminist perspective highlights how women's inequality is connected to systems that allow men to exercise control over women's bodies and sexuality" (54). From this perspective, physical and sexual oppression can be understood as interconnected forms of domination that deny women autonomy and reinforce unequal power relations between men and women.

Another important perspective is provided by Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy*, where she explains "patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. She identifies the household as one of the important structures through which patriarchal relations can be maintained" (43). From this perspective, it is clear how patriarchal control can operate within domestic and familial relationships, where male authority is used to restrict a woman's freedom and choices.

The first form of physical oppression experienced by Kermon comes from her own uncle. Instead of protecting her, he decides to give her to his friend, Wertih, disregarding her wishes and treating her as someone whose life can be arranged according to his own interests. His decision is influenced by Kermon's inherited property and by the expectation that she will become useful to Wertih in his household. This incident demonstrates how patriarchal authority can operate within the family, where a male figure assumes the right to make decisions about a woman's life without considering her consent. This can be witnessed in the following words:

"u la ia kut bad u Wertih na Nongtnger ba un wan shaw bad pyndonkam ia ka ba u mon, ban phah ri khunlung ne un phah ap masi ap blang ne phah trei katba u mon (4)." (had already made an arrangement with Wertih to take her and use her according to his wishes, whether to look after children, tend cattle and goats, or perform whatever work he wanted her to do). From these words, it can be understood that Kermon's own

wishes and choices are completely disregarded. She is treated as someone whose labour and life can be controlled according to the will of a man. In relation to this incident, bell hooks, in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, explains "patriarchy as a system of male domination that gives men power over women and reinforces the belief that men have the right to control women's lives" (17). From this perspective, we can see how male authority is exercised through Kermon's uncle, who decides her future without seeking her consent. His decision to give her to Wertih reveals how Kermon's life is treated as something that can be controlled by male authority, restricting her freedom and agency within a system of male domination.

Kermon's oppression becomes more physical when she refuses to accept her uncle's decision. Rather than respecting her refusal, her uncle responds with physical violence: "U da shim da u siej bad sympat ia ka laisien" (5). (he takes a bamboo stick and beats her three times). This act demonstrates how physical force is used to make Kermon submit to a decision that she does not accept. Her resistance is not treated as a legitimate expression of her own choice. Instead, her refusal is punished through violence. In relation to this incident, Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, argues "that the threat and use of violence against women can function as a means of maintaining male dominance and keeping women in a position of fear and submission" (75). From this perspective, we can understand how physical violence is used to suppress women's resistance. In Kermon's case, her uncle uses physical violence to suppress her resistance and force her to obey his decision. The beating is therefore not merely an act of physical aggression but also a means of controlling Kermon's freedom and preventing her from exercising her own will. Her uncle's use of violence demonstrates how physical force can be employed to maintain male authority over a woman.

The physical abuse inflicted by her uncle is further revealed through Kermon's own words to Phirbon, the wife of Wertih: "Ngam da sngew kwah ban wan shane hynrei tang namar ba i mama i phah jubor lada ngam kohnguh u pynshitom u shoh u dat' u byrngen ruh ban un shu leit bret noh shapoh khlaw, hu-hu" ka iam sngewsih (12). (she did not willingly want to come there but was forced by her uncle. If she refused to obey him, he would punish and beat her and even threaten to abandon her in the jungle and cry).

The most devastating form of oppression experienced by Kermon occurs when she is subjected to sexual coercion by Wertih. Wertih's attraction towards Kermon leads him to seek sexual access to her, but Kermon does not willingly accept his advances. Instead, he uses physical intimidation to force her into submission. This is reflected in the following words:

"Ia ka jingtyrwa jong u baroh, hok naduh mynsiem kam treh kam mon da leilei, hynrei shano phin khiih ka wait sum kane ha shadem u pynap, ymda ka mon sngewbha hynrei ba ka tieng her syrngiew ia kata ka khmut wait, kam banse ban kohnguh tnga ia u" (16). The passage indicates that Kermon does not want to accept Wertih's proposal and does not willingly consent to his desire. However, she is unable to resist because he threatens her

with a knife held against her breast. Her submission is therefore not based on willingness but on fear and intimidation. The oppression faced by Kermon reaches its most tragic point after she returns home carrying a two-month-old child in her womb. Her pregnancy causes her emotional distress and shame, particularly in the presence of Phirbon, Wertih's wife. In anger and pain, Kermon confronts Wertih and questions his treatment of both women: "Khun ka dusmon me mut ban pynlong tnga ia ngi baroh arngut bad ban pynlong ksew ha ka juh ka por mo?" (You shameless man, do you intend to make both of us your wives and treat us like dogs at the same time?). However, instead of responding to her words, Wertih reacts with further physical violence: "Khlem lap kren shi kyntien ruh u la kynjat ia ka phak, kaba pli khrup ha madan ka kyllon, sa shisien u jynthud na krung bad kyrdem na ka kpoh laisien, jar ka iapler ha juh khlem khih shuh (18). (without saying a single word, Wertih kicks Kermon, causing her to fall heavily to the ground. He then strikes and stamps on her stomach three times, leaving her unconscious). From this statement, we can understand that when Kermon finally raises her voice against the injustice committed against her and challenges Wertih, he punishes her by physically assaulting her. In relation to this incident, bell hooks, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, explains "physical assault can demonstrate the maintenance of male domination through violence when a woman challenges or questions male authority" (45). From this perspective, Kermon's voice is answered not with dialogue but with violence, revealing the unequal power relationship between them.

This incident represents one of the most severe forms of physical oppression experienced by Kermon. The violence is directed at her body, particularly her stomach, where she is carrying an unborn child. Wertih's actions reveal an extreme exercise of male power in which violence is used to punish a woman who has dared to speak against him. The consequence of this violence is devastating: "ita i khun ba dang arbnai ha kpoh i la hap noh" (18). (the two-month-old child in her womb was lost). These words show that the violence has devastating consequences for Kermon. Her suffering is no longer limited to physical pain but also leads to emotional trauma and the loss of her unborn child.

Through Kermon's experiences, Sterian Shangpliang's novel *Ka Kermon* exposes the physical oppression experienced by women within a matrilineal society. Kermon is first controlled by her uncle, who disregards her wishes and uses violence to force her into submission. Later, she suffers sexual coercion and physical assault at the hands of Wertih. These incidents demonstrate how male authority can operate through threats, violence, and control over women's bodies and choices. The novel also reveals that physical oppression can exist even within a matrilineal society, showing that matrilineality does not necessarily eliminate patriarchal attitudes or protect women from male domination. Through Kermon's suffering, the novel highlights the denial of women's agency, bodily autonomy, freedom, and dignity.

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About the Author



Pynkmenhunlang G. Sohtun is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Khasi at JJM Nichol's Roy College, Shillong, Meghalaya, India. She is also a PhD Research Scholar in the Department of Khasi at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India. Her academic interests include Khasi language, literature, indigenous culture, and regional studies. She is committed to promoting linguistic heritage through teaching, research, and scholarly contributions to the field of Khasi studies.